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SELECTING YOUR HORSE

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Potential horse owners must make many decisions before choosing which horse to buy. This Factsheet describes the various factors to consider when selecting your horse. (In this Factsheet, the terms "ride" or "rider" apply to all forms of activities with horses, whether it is showing in a lead-line class, riding or driving.) Whether you are interested in pleasure riding, driving or competing in some form of activity, whenever possible, select a horse to suit your specific purpose.

If this will be your first horse, choose one that is quiet and well trained, so you can gain experience and build confidence as a horse owner. This is especially true if the horse is for a novice rider. An inexperienced rider riding an inexperienced horse can lead to unpleasant and dangerous results.

THE HORSE INDUSTRY

The horse industry can be divided into three main sectors: the racing industry, the non-racing industry and the breeding industry. These industries supply many of the horses used in a number of activities or disciplines.

Racing Industry

- races driven from a sulky, including both pacers and trotters, using Standardbred horses
- flat racing under saddle, involving mainly Thoroughbred and Quarter horses
- steeplechase, a race with obstacles throughout the course

Non-Racing Industry

- English riding events, including dressage, show jumping and three-day events
- polo
- Western events, including performance classes (e.g., Western riding, trail) and game classes, where riders test their skill and their horse's speed in timed events (e.g., barrel racing, pole bending)
- rodeo events (e.g., roping, cutting)
- driving – driving one or more horses for work, competition or pleasure (includes horse pulls)
- agricultural and forestry work

Breeding Industry

- keeping mares and stallions for reproduction and the transfer of their genetic potential; includes horses of all breeds and disciplines

Some horses have great versatility and can perform a number of different disciplines; however, none could be expected to perform all of the activities that may be required of horses. Within the various disciplines, there are some broad terms that the newcomer will encounter.

HORSE DISCIPLINES OR ACTIVITIES

Pleasure Horses

Pleasure horses may include all breeds and types, kept for the sheer joy of riding and ownership. Pleasure horses are used for activities such as trail riding or driving. These activities afford excellent opportunities for relaxation, physical exercise and companionship with friends, while travelling on scenic nature trails. A pleasure horse, like most other horses, spends most of its time at a walk. Therefore, it should have a prompt, fast, flatfooted walk that can travel 4 or 5 miles an hour. A faster gait is also essential in most cases. Most people are introduced to the horse industry with a pleasure horse.

Working Stock Horses

Working stock horses, equipped with Western tack, are raised for use on ranches for gathering cattle and completing the daily ranch duties. Machines and equipment have replaced horses for carrying out many of the tasks associated with ranch work. However, it is hard to imagine the complete replacement of horses on ranches and farms where large numbers of cattle are produced and raised. Working stock horses are the backbone of the fast-growing sport of rodeo and are used in growing numbers as pleasure horses in suburban and urban areas.

Show Horses

Show horses are defined as those kept mainly for competition in shows. Horses can be shown at halter for conformation, pulling a carriage or under saddle. Under saddle, they can be ridden in the English, Western or side-saddle tradition, and can compete in many levels of

competition, both in amateur and professional levels, from gymkhanas to the Olympic equestrian events. Professional training and expertise in handling and management are often required to get these horses to the winner's circle. However, many amateur show classes are also available. Some riders get great satisfaction from exhibiting, whether they win or not. Those who feel they must win should prepare themselves to face stiff competition when they decide to enter the horse-showing business.

Sport Horses

The term "sport horse" has been applied most recently to horses that are produced in anticipation of being used in the Olympic events of dressage, stadium jumping or three-day events. This term is also used interchangeably with the term "warmblood." However, many hot-blooded breeds, including Thoroughbreds and Arabians, are also classified as sport horses. Therefore, the terminology becomes imprecise at times.

Horse Breeding

Horse breeding as a business is highly specialized and requires considerable capital investment. Only about 70% of mares bred produce a live foal. This low production rate in comparison to other livestock species, along with a long generation interval (the period from birth to puberty), makes a horse-breeding enterprise an expensive and long-term commitment. The experience of awaiting the birth of a foal and watching it grow and develop to maturity is indeed a good one, but not usually financially rewarding. Only superior animals with proven records of achievement, free from known genetic defects, should be mated. This applies to both mares and stallions. In many breeding establishments, the mares are not used for riding. However, normal work in early pregnancy, and light work until about a month before foaling, can be beneficial for the health of an expectant mare.

SELECTING A HORSE

After deciding the intended use(s) of your horse, consider the following aspects before making your selection.

Breed

There are 20 or more different purebred breeds of horse to choose from in North America. They differ in size, shape, colour, disposition, conformation, ability and adaptability. Some are "specialists," excelling in a narrow field; others are "generalists," adapted to many tasks without being superior in any specialized field. None will be excellent in all uses to which horses may be subjected.

If you are looking for a parade horse, colour and style are important, but these attributes would contribute little to a working stock horse. Selection for speed would dictate certain breeds. Selection for gaits would eliminate other breeds.

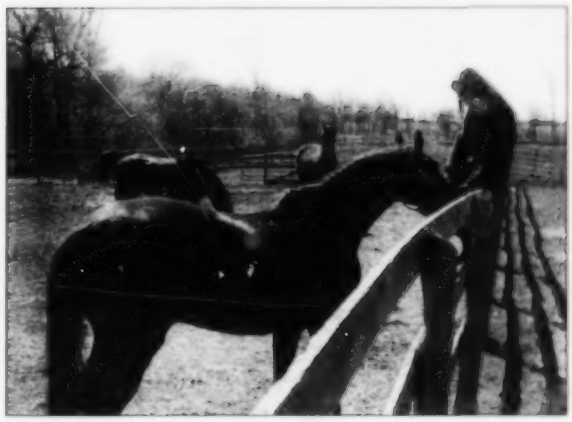

Figure 1. Look at several horses of your chosen type before making your selection.

Although there are exceptions to almost any statement, it is seldom practical to select an individual to perform a duty not characteristic of its breed. Quarter horses, in general, have an inherited "cow sense" but it doesn't mean that Thoroughbreds cannot work cattle. It would be best to view a large number of horses of a certain breed performing the desired task well, and select your horse from that breed (Figure 1).

With an aging human population and many baby boomers taking up, or returning to horseback riding, there is an increased interest in an "easy" ride. Gaited horses may be preferred in these situations, as their walk and trot are much smoother. Crossbred horses sometimes combine the fast, easy walk of one breed and the flexibility of another. These make good horses for sustained travelling, such as trail riding.

Conformation

Conformation refers to physical shape and balance of the horse's component parts (see Figure 2). "Good" conformation increases the probability that a horse can perform the functions characteristic of its breed for an extended period of time without becoming unsound, but is not a guarantee. "Faulty" conformation may impair some activities and may predispose a horse to unsoundness (e.g., injury, lameness).

Although horses vary in size by breeds from 200 to 2,000 lb, some characteristics of good conformation are common to all of them. However, there are breed differences. Each breed association will have breed standards that you should be aware of when choosing a specific breed. The characteristics that make a good riding horse differ from those that make a good driving horse or draft horse. For the novice, it is best to consult a knowledgeable horseperson to obtain advice on conformation.

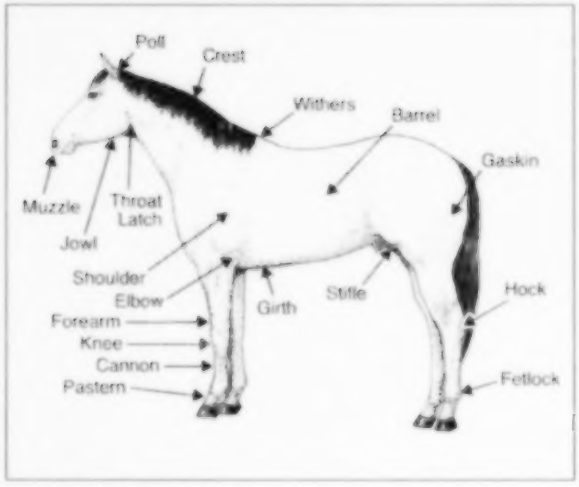

Figure 2. Parts of a horse.

Once you've found a horse that suits your needs, ensure that it is free from blemishes that may interfere with its future uses and value. Consider having an independent, trained person evaluate your prospective purchase. Veterinarians will provide a valuable service by performing a pre-purchase examination, which consists of a complete examination of all body systems and may include laboratory tests, radiographs of the legs and feet, and endoscopic examination of the lungs to assess the health of the horse. The extent of the examination depends on the value of the horse and the degree to which the prospective owner wishes to ensure that there are no surprises that may hinder the horse's future athletic ability. A pre-purchase examination is not a pass-or-fail examination; the veterinarian provides a list of the horse's strengths or weaknesses to help the owner decide if this is the right horse.

The pre-purchase examination will include a soundness examination of legs and feet at the walk and trot. Lameness in a front limb is indicated by a nod of the head when weight is placed on the sound limb. The croup drops when weight is shifted from a lame hind limb to a sound one. Pain in a front limb will be noticeable in a standing position by "pointing," i.e., resting one front foot ahead of the other, to relieve weight and pain from a sore shoulder, leg or foot. Veterinarians will often use a hoof tester to localize pain in the feet. The locations of some of the more common lesions are illustrated in Figure 3.

Age and Size

Children should learn from a well-trained, dependable horse. This usually means a reliable older horse rather than one in training less than a year. Well-trained horses 5 years and older make good mounts for beginners.

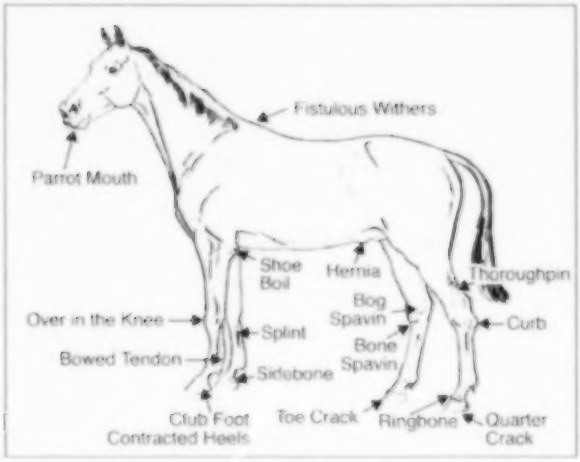

Figure 3. Location of some common areas of unsoundness.

Much older horses are very satisfactory if they are sound. One common mistake is to buy a young horse, unbroken or "green-broken," or a nervous horse that the child cannot handle safely. Remember that a scared horse and a scared child make poor companions and can yield disastrous results.

The size of horse and rider should receive consideration. Small children find all horses difficult to saddle and mount. Ponies can be a handful for children due to their often independent nature. Small horses should not be asked to carry heavy riders and equipment. Twenty percent of its body weight is a substantial load for a horse to carry on long rides. See Figure 4.

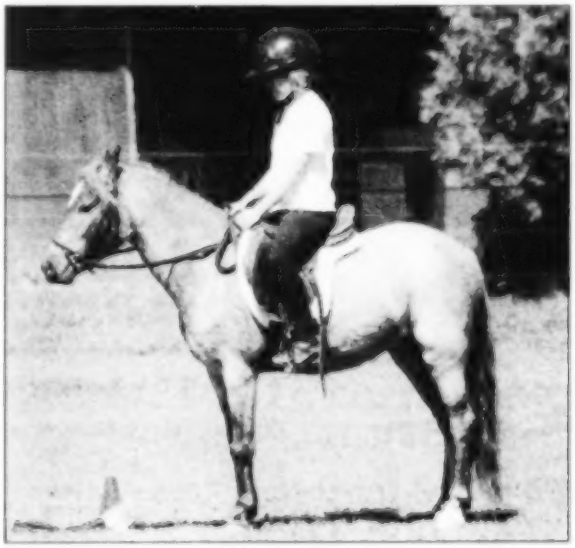

Figure 4. As attached as we become to foals, it is usually better for beginners to start with a well-broken horse.

A prospective buyer may dismiss an older horse due to its age. Many of these old-timers, 15–30 years of age, are ideal first horses for a novice rider, despite some minor unsoundness. The key is determining the amount of work required of the horse, its level of soundness and whether or not it is able to perform this work safely for the rider without causing any welfare concerns for the horse.

Disposition and Vices

Some horses, like some people, have nervous dispositions. These animals should be handled only by experienced riders. Some breeds are referred to as hot breeds (Thoroughbreds, Arabians), and others are referred to as cold breeds (draft breeds, including Percheron, Clydesdale, Belgian), while a mix of these two classes of horse may be called warmbloods. Regardless of the breed, there are individual differences within breeds that can cause a horse to be "hot" in temperament. A docile horse is the ideal mount for a novice rider. Certain activities to which horses are subjected encourage nervousness. Timed events make most horses excitable, and some become hard to control. A Standardbred horse in harness and standing beside the track can have a heart rate of 120 beats per minute (normal resting heart rate is 40–60 bpm), just from the anticipation of racing.

Some riders prefer their horses to be quieter than others. They often ask for advice on nutrition and the feeding of diets that do not cause their horses to exhibit "hot" temperaments, as heavy grain feeding may increase the spirit of some horses. Underfeeding is not an option for dealing with the spirited horse. Nutrition experts can provide advice on tailoring a ration to suit the horse's exercise and physiological needs. A regular riding routine also helps to calm many horses.

Horses can develop unacceptable behaviour or vices that might make them dangerous. Avoid horses exhibiting vices, such as kicking, running away and rearing up.

Fads

Fads come and go in most industries, including the horse industry. Often a fad allows many individual horses to command large prices when, in reality, their usefulness is seriously limited by faulty conformation or poor training. These fads may include a rare breed or genetic pool within a breed (Egyptian Arabians), or colour of hair coat (Palominos). Many of these animals may be used for breeding without any evaluation of their breeding value based on measurable genetic traits, such as speed or performance.

Buyers will sometimes decide on the colour of horse they want to buy, purchase the animal, and then find it is neither the right individual nor the right breed to meet their objectives. Good conformation is available in all colours and should be a primary consideration, regardless of the use intended for the horse. A good horse never has a bad colour.

Pedigree

Generally speaking, pedigree selection receives more emphasis in race and show horses than in any others. A distant ancestor on a pedigree has a very low probability of contributing any specific trait to an individual horse. Emphasis should be placed on the performance of close relatives (sire, grandsire, dam and grand dam). Selection based on pedigree is extremely important when all other selection tools are also considered, including conformation and the effects of training and feeding.

If a stallion consistently sires good horses, his services are worth more than those of a stallion that sires an occasional top horse and many "ordinary" ones. Remember that mares contribute a large part to the equation. Only mares with proven abilities in their respective discipline should be used for breeding. In addition, the temperament of the mare contributes a lot to the final temperament of the foal, both genetically and as learned behaviour.

Price

Last but not least, you will have to consider the price. The original price of a horse is usually relatively minimal when compared to the cost of training and feeding over a few years. It can be difficult to find well-trained, affordably priced horses. In the long run, the purchase of an inexpensive, untrained horse may not be a wise economical decision.

This Factsheet was authored by Dr. Bob Wright, Lead Veterinarian, Equine and Alternate Species, and Gerrit Rietveld, Animal Care Specialist, OMAFRA, Fergus.

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